

## Tour Report

### Rare Mammals of the Eastern Cape

29 October – 8 November 2025

Elephant



Lion



Black rhino



Mantis



Compiled by Emma Healey

**Wednesday 29 October 2025**

**Day 1:**

Heathrow to Johannesburg

**Thursday 30 October 2025**

**Day 2:**

After a change in Johannesburg, the group flew to Port Elizabeth and was picked up by our driver and driven the two hours to Kariega. Even driving into the reserve, we saw giraffe, zebra and more. On arrival, we were met by Wayne, our driver/guide for the week. We had a lovely welcome by the Ukhozi team from the lodge, who gave us a welcome/induction and then showed us to our rooms so we could settle in before meeting for dinner.

**Friday 31 October 2025**

**Day 3:**

We awoke today to a beautiful sunrise, with the red sky awaiting us. Descending into the valley, we came upon a male ostrich showing his 'dancing' skills to a female, but she wasn't keen, so he quickly went back to eating! They were surrounded by a herd of eland and wildebeest peppering the plains.



Image by Wayne

We went to the riverbed, stopping briefly to search for kingfishers or other birds and enjoyed the peace and tranquillity for a couple of minutes. Starting the engine again, we drove up the slope towards the other side and as we reached the top, we almost ran into a huge white rhino that was making its way down to the riverbed. It's incredible how something so big and clumsy looking (sorry rhinos!!) can be so quiet and sneak up on you.

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We spent the rest of the drive exploring the river beds and plains nearby in the lower areas, finding a good range of birds, including collared kingfisher, giant kingfisher, village, cape weaver and black-backed weaver.



In a spot at the base of the hills, along the riverbank, a number of weavers were making nests from the grass nearby, so we stopped for a while and observed them. One returned to the nest with a cricket



On the plains, there was a large number of warthog families, alert as ever, feeding and running across the grass. We also came across a young giraffe exploring on its own, which seemed intrigued by our vehicle.



On the plains, some impala were running and chasing each other, so we took the opportunity to do some panning as the light was quite dim.



Over our lunch break, the heavens opened, and we had a big storm so we were assessing the situation about when to leave. We discovered a beautiful green mantis in the small flowerbed near the dining area, which posed in some lovely positions for us. Soon after we decided we should leave it be, a lovely white collared sunbird came down to feed on some flowers, briefly giving some lovely photo opportunities with the dappled light behind it.



Luckily, by the time we wanted to leave, the rain eased so we were able to head out into the valley. After the storm, the grass was looking very green and lush, and everything was coming out of hiding into the fresh air. There was a large herd of buffalo in the tall grasses, with a couple of young calves. A pair of ostriches were guarding a brood of around 16 very young babies. It was lovely to see so many broods of ostrich chicks doing so well.



Giraffes tend to pepper the landscape throughout Kariega and we saw a lot as we drove through the reserve and over to the larger part across the main road, where there were even more giraffes. A girafternoon!



We came across the lioness and her cubs playing in and out of the bushes close to the fence line. We had heard that they were there but had reports that they disappeared into the bushes so we thought we'd go and check anyway and as we arrived, the cubs all bounded out of the bushes and started to play close to the vehicle. Soon after, the mother came out and lay watching them. We all sat together watching them play for a while, but the light was dimming and they went back into the bushes, so we decided it was time for



sundowners.

After sundowners, we drove back towards the lodge with the spotlight. Wayne's supersonic eyes spotted a Cape dwarf Chameleon low in the grasses. In a more open area with some termite mounds, we came across a Cape leopard toad (a first for all of us!) and soon after a Spotted eagle owl on a termite mound, but unfortunately it didn't hang around for long!



**Saturday 1 November 2025**

**Day 4:**

We were so grateful this morning to see blue skies, no rain! It was very windy though, so we drove through a sheltered forest area. Wayne could hear paradise flycatchers, but as ever they were not keen to be seen. We also had a few glimpses of a turaco, but it refused to pose for us, so we continued. We were treated to a brief view of a Dideric cuckoo, which we could hear before we could see it due to its distinctive song.



As we were driving along, we all got VERY excited as we saw a flash of red, but alas, it was a jackal. The search for caracal continued... Some more birding ensued, with lovely views of a dark-capped bulbul and cape starlings.



We could hear a male lion calling all morning but it was so windy that it was difficult to locate where the call was coming from. We weren't the only ones... the antelopes were very aware that he was nearby and were all alert, from waterbucks, bushbucks and impalas to red hartebeest.



After some time of enjoying the views in the higher section of the reserve, we heard some baboons alarming (always a reliable source!), so we went across the valley and found the collared brother lying in a burnt section of grass looking very full. He'd obviously lost his brother, so was trying to locate him.



We made our way back to camp, hoping the wind might die down over lunch. Unfortunately, it didn't, but we did have three female bushbucks next to the restaurant, obviously also trying to shelter from the wind. A turaco also visited but didn't sit still long enough for any photos.

This afternoon, we stayed in the more sheltered areas. On the way, we passed a herd of buffalo and two white rhinos on top of the hill. One was looking quite drowsy, so Wayne suggested it had recently been dehorned so may still be working off the anaesthesia. Further along, we had some good views of a duiker, which generally disappear straight into the bushes.



We drove to an area known as 'Gardenia', a beautiful area of forests and streams. We came across a beautiful tambourine dove and a dusky flycatcher in the darker area, as well as some brief glimpses of a Nerina trogon flying past, but it wouldn't stop.



We heard a pair of kudus alarming, which is generally a good sign of a predator around, but we couldn't find anything nearby. In a nearby stream, we found a mountain wagtail but the light was low, so we stopped to see if there were any hippos in the river and were pleased to find a mum and baby, with the baby resting on mum's back after playing on its own for a while.

After dinner we went back out on a night drive, down the hill to the plains. Some of the hippos were out of the water, including a large male and a number of spring hares were hopping around into the bushes. Wayne knew about a waterbuck carcass, which we checked on in case any bush pigs were there, but unfortunately, they weren't. As we stopped, however, we heard a couple of African Wood owls calling to each other, so we looked for them in the nearby trees and found one briefly before it flew off. We also came upon a lovely

nightjar, which, instead of flying off straight away, sat and posed for us before eventually having enough.



On our way back to the lodge, we passed four female reedbucks, which are not often seen.

**Sunday 2 November 2025**

**Day 5:**

This morning we had a lie-in, agreeing to meet for breakfast at 09:00. Some of us were up before breakfast and made the most of the nice light by watching the sunbirds eating the pollen in the tree by the main path. By the pool, we found more white-collared sunbirds and a lovely cape white-eye flitting around the bushes.



Around the main area of the lodge, some mousebirds and dark-capped bulbul were posing.



We left for River Lodge at about 11:30, crossing the dry riverbed, which although not flowing, had some standing water and we spotted a terrapin as we drove past, watching us from the edge of the water. On the plains, Thandy (the hornless rhino) and her young son were resting. We stopped to watch them as they looked so relaxed and as we did, we noticed a male blesbok having a 'mad five minutes', racing around the open area. He never stopped, chasing some females, then endlessly running in circles. Incredible to watch the speed he could reach.



As we passed through Kudu Kloof (Afrikaans for cliff), we saw a huge troop of baboons just reaching the top of the hill. There were a number of giraffes and zebras grazing there as usual. As we approached River Lodge, we spotted a couple of leopard tortoise walking in the sunlight and as it was in a safe area with no predators, we could get out of the vehicle and take some low-angle shots of them.



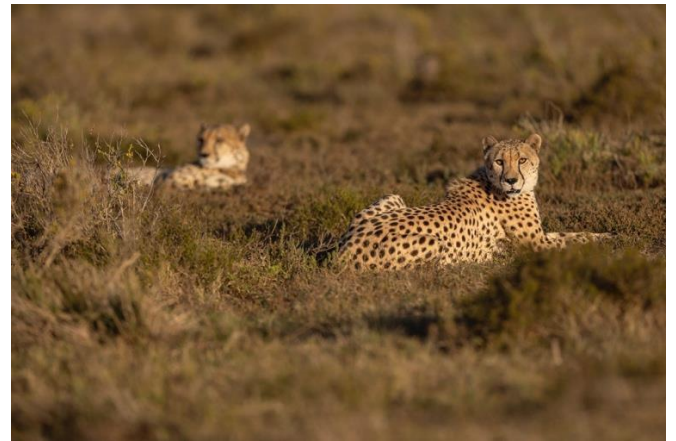
This afternoon, we went out for our first afternoon drive in the River Lodge area, leaving at 15:30. There had been reports of a caracal that had been seen early this morning on the plains near the lodge, so we drove around scanning the area before going up the hill to see if we could spot anything from higher up. Unfortunately, we had no luck, so while we scanned, we watched a jackal buzzard being mobbed by a blacksmith lapwing and then drove on towards the main area of the reserve, past two large male elephants who passed our vehicle quietly and continued eating.

We had reports of some white rhinos on the ridge, so we made our way up the hill to have a look. As we stopped at the top to scan the Serengeti area, Wayne and I saw an Impala running very fast and kicking up dust so at first we wondered if perhaps it was like the blesbok that we've seen earlier but soon after that we realised that it was being chased by a cheetah.

The cheetah was unsuccessful and the two brothers were then spotted walking into an area on the plains so we made our way down to photograph them as they lay watching the passing wildebeest and zebras. They were obviously ready to hunt, but not having much success!



They managed to scare the wildebeest and zebra enough to get them running away, then standing guard, but then they decided to lie down and have a rest to recharge.



We decided to have sundowners on a hill overlooking the Serengeti just in case the cheetah decided they might like to hunt again but it was a picture of serenity and we had our sundowners watching blesbok, springbok, zebra, wildebeest and giraffes enjoying the last of the light.



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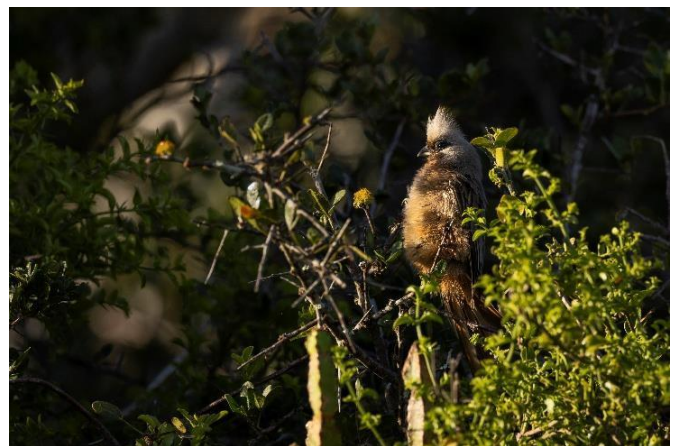
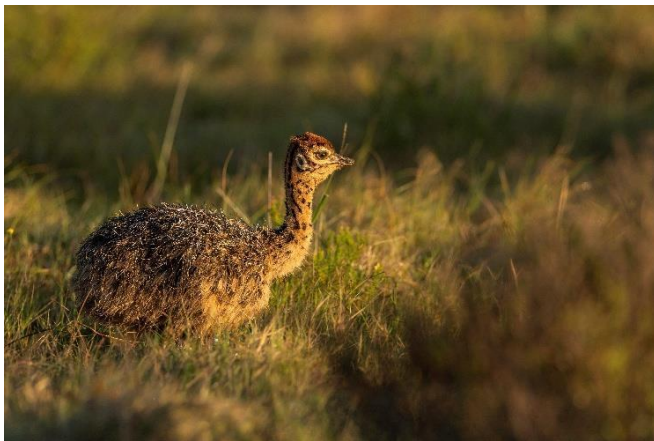
Monday 3 November 2025

**Day 6:**

This morning was beautiful, clear and cold. The mist was rising off the river, giving the whole area an ethereal feel. We began the morning exploring the higher plains, where we saw our first black wildebeest, grazing with some blesbok. Further down in the valley, we passed a large number of ostrich, including the parents with babies near the road, although only six now remained.



We drove slowly around, taking it all in, being watched by a Denhams bustard, black-headed heron and we passed bushes busy with black-faced mouse birds, a zebra with a young foal, a herd of kudu, and more ungulates enjoying the dewy grass.



As we were watching the quintessential African scene, we received a report of a lion chasing buffalo, so we decided to head over to the area as it wasn't too far away. It was a steep, hilly area, quite dense with trees, and when we arrived, we could see the herd of buffalo disappearing into the dense euphorbia but there was no sign of the lions so we went for a coffee with a view.



While we were there, Wayne was looking through the binoculars and thought he'd seen a black rhino on the plains, so we went to the area and checked some waterholes, but there was no sign. We searched for a Knysna turaco after a brief sighting, but it was only ever in bad light, unfortunately.

On our way back, we came upon a herd of elephants with a matriarch and a couple of 2-to 3-year-olds learning from the older ones how to kick and pick up grass. It's always wonderful to watch behaviours like this, with one generation teaching the next. We were back at the lodge for 09:30.

After breakfast, we went out on a boat trip along the river at 11:00. In complete contrast to last week, the weather was bright and sunny, so we were grateful for the cover of the roof.

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After only a couple of minutes, we came upon one of the brown-hooded kingfishers nesting in the banks close to the main area, with a scorpion in its beak. It stopped briefly before taking it into the burrow for the babies. Hopefully, she removed the sting!

As we continued down the river, we passed some water thick knees, a great white egret and then further towards the sea, we started to find more species on the small islands in the middle of the river. The light was very harsh so unfortunately it was only good for record shots but we saw a good variety of species, including Goliath herons, egrets, cormorants, black oyster catchers, whimbrel and common green shanks. We floated along to the sound of some fish eagles and black kites calling overhead and then landing in the euphorbia after being mobbed by smaller birds.



On our way back, we passed a couple of rock hyrax (dassies) on the rocks by the river. Some were sunbathing, while others sheltered in the shade. One of the things I didn't think would be on the species list suddenly appeared by the boat as we were moving closer to get a good few of some pied kingfishers, which were sheltering and hunting in the shade of the trees. As we were manoeuvring the boat, we suddenly spotted a cuttlefish alongside us! We weren't sure if it had come up for a bit of sunshine or was confused, but it was incredible to see it swim around for a few seconds, then disappear back into the deep. We then watched the pied kingfishers fly in and out for a few minutes, including one who had caught a mullet and was banging it on the branch. As we arrived back at the lodge, the monkeys were resting in the low branches of the trees, with mum keeping an eye on the small one to make sure it was safe.



After lunch, we had some time to relax a little before heading out again onto the plains. On our way along the fenceline, we came upon a breeding herd of elephants and as the light was still so bright, we spent some time just watching and listening to them. Sometimes this is not done enough and a huge part of the experience is the sound and watching the behaviour, so we try and do this, particularly while the light is too bright for any meaningful shots. It also lets everyone experiment a little with close-up details, if we have the privilege of being so close.



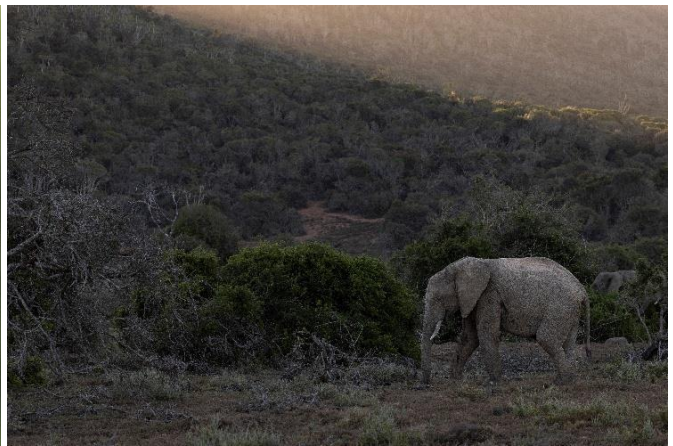
It was clear that the wildlife was enjoying the sunshine as much as we were, and everyone was hunting for food. The grasses were full of zebra, impala, eland (including a very young baby) and a secretary bird looking for food. While we sat watching the secretary bird (why do they never seem to look into the camera – always just walking away?!) and willing it to turn, three white rhinos walked to the edge of the hill and posed nicely for us before carrying on.



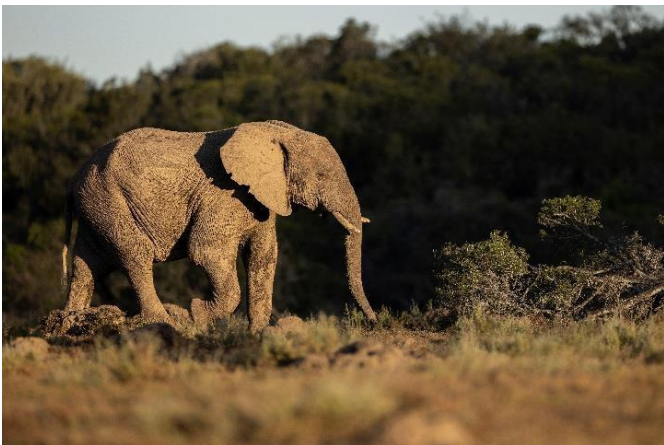
As we drove across the plains, we heard that the two male cheetahs were lying in the shade under a tree, so we went to see them. They were not moving but they were close to a tree that was visited by a brown-headed kingfisher and an African crowned hornbill who were hunting nearby, so we had some lovely views of them.



After we realised the cheetahs were not going anywhere anytime soon, we drove towards the river, passing a wryneck singing loudly on a stump and encountered a huge herd of elephants making their way towards the river road. We stopped and immersed ourselves in the herd, with them walking towards us, past us and all around us.



There were a couple of very young babies, so we watched how the herd protected them and the light was improving as we watched, so we were able to play with that for some portraits, with the darkness on the trees providing a backdrop.



After more time spent with them, watching them playing, dusting themselves, play fighting and eating, we made our way down the river road before it was blocked by them, to have some sundowners overlooking them from afar.



As we were packing up to come back, we had a look to see if they've made any progress along the road and saw one of the males mating with a female and then there was an almighty ruckus, which slowed them down slightly, so we decided to head back to camp before the road was blocked. We used the spotlight on the way back but didn't really find much unfortunately, other than a scrub hair and a nightjar. As we returned to the lodge, we were welcomed by the team in traditional dress and a boma dinner by the waterhole.

**Tuesday 4 November 2025**

### **Day 7:**

This morning we decided to take a quick circuit around the main road to check for caracals and then we made our way over to 'Gaia', where the lion mum and cubs had been seen yesterday. We found them lying on the edge of a dip at the bottom of a hill, guarding a giraffe kill in the bushes.



The family was resting after clearly having a good feast overnight. One cub went off for some food and then the rest of the cubs went to join him and they played in the trees for a while. In the end, one came out to pose nicely as some sun poked through the clouds so we managed a few lovely portrait images. As we were sitting with them, a call came over the radio (as all guides knew our target was caracals!) that a caracal had been seen near the Homestead with a sub-adult, so we raced over there. We drove around for a while, but there was no sign, even though we felt like we'd combed the entire area. These cats are masters of disguise!

We stopped for a coffee and had some time to get the macro kit out, as there was a lovely jumping spider on the vehicle and then on a termite mound nearby.

We hoped that there might be a call for the caracal while we were stopped, but all was quiet, so we went back for breakfast. Poor Wayne was trying as hard as he could! As we were finishing breakfast, he raced into the room and said, “grab your cameras, quick, I’m going to get the vehicle”. We did as we were told and he raced us up the hill, to where one of the guides was sitting watching a caracal that he’d spotted hunting as he made his way back from doing some deliveries in town nearby. Typically, as we arrived, she walked around a bush, jumped over a branch and disappeared into the dense foliage. We moved around to see another glimpse of her before she moved into the deep bush. We managed to grab a couple of images and one of the group was the only one to capture any images of its face, whereas the rest of us managed what we decided to call ‘impressions of a caracal’. We stayed in the area for a while just in case it came out again and scanned the treeline, but it had hunkered down out of sight. What an amazing privilege to see one and a big thank you to Wayne and the team for making it happen!



Images by Kathryn Stickleby

After the excitement, Wayne drove us back to the lodge and finished packing, got our things together and then started our boat transfer to Settler’s Drift at around noon.

We moved reasonably quickly down the river past egrets, pied kingfishers, yellow-billed ducks and common sandpipers along the banks, as well as a few grazing giraffes watching us as they chewed and jackal buzzards flying overhead. It was still quite cloudy, which was good as it kept us cooler as we travelled and we were able to photograph things more easily than in the contrasty sunlight.



We passed the nest, where we'd seen the spotted eagle owl chicks the previous week, but they were nowhere to be seen, so we feared the worst for them. The adults were still nearby, so we stopped to photograph them briefly as they posed, and we were watched by a vervet monkey on patrol.



As we approached a low, muddy section of the riverbank, we saw a malachite kingfisher on the bank, hunting for fish in the water. He followed us down the river for a while before flying off into a bush, but then a pied kingfisher took over, not only keeping us company, but seemingly trying to race us to the end (it won!). We also passed a rocky area, which was home to some rock hyrax. A couple disappeared into the cracks, but one did sit and enjoy a ray of sunshine that had burst through, enabling us to get a good look at it. We arrived at the dock and were driven up to our new home for the last few days, with a stunning view of the area.



We explored the new lodge and on the way to look at the pool, managed to find a Knysna woodpecker hidden in the bushes and a large planthopper resting on the furniture.



This afternoon was our first drive from Settler's Drift and we had a whole new area to explore. Wayne had seen a lioness quite close to camp as he drove to pick us up so we decided to follow up on her. She had moved away from where she'd been lying in the shade, but we followed her tracks into the bush area and found her stalking some warthogs. As we drove around, she raced into the bush and we heard the squeals that told us she'd successfully caught one. We raced around to try and catch sight of her and managed to find a clearing for a few seconds before she dragged it into the shade.



We spotted a three-banded plover by the entrance to a warthog burrow in Lily Crossing, where a female often sits and watches the world go by.



We drove out onto the plains and found two yellow mongooses running around trying to find food. We found the burrow and there was a young one poking its head out every so often, so we decided to park up for a while and watch them before moving on.

We carried on across the plains and found a pair of ostrich, warthogs and impala grazing close to a waterhole. The light was lovely, so after watching a crowned lapwing defending its territory, we decided to focus on some backlit shots of the ostriches who were making their way to the dark, shady background.



As the sun set, we went on to Manze Crossing, where the magic fairies (wonderful camp team) had set up some sundowner drinks for us on the dry riverbed.

**Wednesday 5 November 2025**

### **Day 8:**

We awoke to a lovely, clear morning, with a bit of a chill in the air and saw our first Steppe buzzards as we drove lower onto the plains. Wayne spotted some very fresh black rhino tracks on the road so we followed them, hoping we weren't far behind, but they disappeared into the dense bush so we couldn't follow any further.

As ever, we were looking for turacos and going down Turaco drive, a flash of green went over us and we stopped the vehicle to listen. As we sat there, it suddenly flew towards us and landed right above us. Of course, none of us were ready for the 'in-flight' shot, so tried to get it as it landed, and then we were able to

grab a couple of quick portraits before, true to form, it flew off again.



We left the woodland area, passing a pair of olive woodpeckers on a dead tree. We had reports that the two male lions had been up in the hills. It was also a prime area for the elusive caracals (or as we'd renamed them – fluffy unicorns!), so we made our way up there and found them lying next to each other overseeing their territory from above (in the few seconds that their heads were up!). There were two white rhinos nearby munching on the bushes, so we went over there for a few minutes before going back to see if the lions had moved (they hadn't). The light was getting very harsh as there were no clouds, so we made our way back down to the valley.



Instead of going back to camp, Wayne drove us round to a spot overlooking the area where we were surprised by a wonderful bush breakfast, so we enjoyed some more time surrounded by the wildlife before returning for a rest.

This afternoon, we left at 16:00 and went towards a large herd of elephants, which had been seen close to camp by the water. It was still very warm, but the wind was starting to pick up, particularly at higher elevations. We spent more time in the lower areas, passing a huge tower of giraffes, spent time with a crash of rhinos and passed a

male nyala grazing in the lush, green flowers.



We stopped in a beautiful area, sheltered by the surrounding hills and trees, for sundowners. As we stood, we were serenaded by a coppery-tailed coucal calling very close to us, which Wayne said suggests that the rain is coming. On our way back to camp, we used the spotlight and found a spotted eagle owl sitting fairly low in the euphorbia. It was very relaxed, and sat there calling while we watched underneath.



**Thursday 6 November 2025**

### **Day 8:**

We awoke to a rainy morning and as it was so wet, we went straight to the hidden lagoon on the bushman's riverbed to look for birds, who like to shelter there in the rain, but instead we found two bull elephants slowly making their way past the lagoon and through the mud. There was a lovely mist over the hills watched the young yellow mongoose for a while, having zoomies around the burrow.



We moved on to the plains, where we spent some time photographing zebras, elephants and nyala in the rain, as well as a leopard tortoise crossing the road.



We returned to lodge at around 08:00 to a much-needed roaring fire and coffee. During our break, some of us were treated to a mother and baby bushbuck, where the baby was nursing, close to the rooms, and the cape batis were busy flying around trying to feed their young.



We left for our last afternoon drive a little early at 15:30 as it was already quite cloudy so the wildlife was likely to be out and about. We scanned the riverbeds first and passed a giant kingfisher preening on a branch, before we crossed cactus plains and went towards River Lodge. On our way, we were looking for black rhino, among other things. We drove high and looked out to see whether we could spot anything. There was a lovely mix of white rhino, elephants, giraffes, a plethora of antelopes but nothing more, so we enjoyed the lovely view as the sky cleared.

Driving through the valley, we came out into the open and found the lioness and her cubs lying out in the open close to the giraffe carcass. We spent a lovely few minutes watching them relax and play together, the male even chasing a fly and rolling a rock around like a domestic cat does a toy.



Drove through the caracal valley (arrow) and then around the lioness and her cubs lying close to the giraffe carcass. Lovely few mins with them chilling and the young male playing with a rock. Slightly further up the hill, about 100 metres away from the mum and cubs, we found one of the large male lions (scarface) lying on his back after having some of the giraffe.

We drove back towards the lodge through the plains and came upon an interesting sight – a giraffe eating the bones of a wildebeest carcass – a process known as osteophasia. It increased their calcium if they have recently had a calf or they are pregnant, so this is when you are likely to see this behaviour and it was fascinating to watch.



We stopped for a sundowner in the middle of the open plains in the hope that we might find a rhino or something similar. We did watch some impala chasing each other and heard some branches breaking, which we thought must be rhino but unfortunately, there was no sign of them, so we decided to head back towards the lodge for dinner. On our way back, we spotted and came upon the lioness from a couple of days ago walking towards us along the road. We stopped the vehicle and let her walk towards us and past, silently carrying on into the night to her next location.

After a boma dinner (inside the restaurant due to the possibility of rain), we went out on a short night drive for around an hour and a half. Our main target was the black rhino, so we focused on the two plains close to Settler's Drift, across the river, stopping in one of the river crossings where a cormorant was resting and having a look if anything else was around. After we crossed the river and come into the open plains, other than impala, waterbuck and nyala there was not much else to be seen until we spotted a possible large lump at the end of the planes so we went slowly towards it and low and behold there was a black rhino who

looked at us for a brief moment before making away right into the bush and climbing up the hill. We continued to explore a couple of the other areas and other than antelopes, we didn't see much until we suddenly came upon a porcupine who looked at us briefly before racing back into the bush. After leaving the porcupine, we decided we would head back to the lodge, ready for a morning drive.



**Friday 7 November 2025**

**Day 9:**

This morning was one member of the group's birthday so we went out to enjoy our final morning with some extra energy. There was a beautiful red sky for a few mins before it became more grey. There was a group of jackals on the plain as we crossed the dry riverbed and then suddenly... There was the elusive black rhino.

She was quite a distance away initially, so we pulled up and switched off the engine, giving her space. She watched us for a while, then approached confidently, stopping to pose on each side of the vehicle before seeming to decide that we were ok to stay and watch her, so she continued eating, and we left her to it.



There were a number of giraffes and zebras around the Serengeti area, but otherwise it was quite quiet. We watched a Burchell's coucal calling and stopped for coffee in a stunning area with lots of greenery after having a brief sighting of a Diederik's cuckoo.

We drove around the corner and saw the lioness with cubs walking across the plains, so we grabbed a few

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images of them walking towards/past us as they went up the hill. We then saw that one of the big males was lying a little bit above us at 'jackal junction'.



On our way back towards the lodge, we passed a couple of white rhinos on the plains and a number of giraffes, blesbok, springbok, kudu and other herbivores. We also passed a big troop of vervet monkeys foraging in the open on the plains, which is unusual as it puts them much more at risk from land predators and raptors, and usually they are in the trees for protection.

We passed by a mother and baby francolins on our way back to the lodge for breakfast, then checked out to start our journey home.

Images by Emma Healey (unless stated)

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